



TITLE:

<Book Reviews>The Spirit of Things:  
Materiality and Religious Diversity in  
Southeast Asia JULIUS BAUTISTA, ed. Ithaca,  
NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell  
University, 2012, x+220p.

AUTHOR(S):

Lee, Joseph Tse-Hei

---

CITATION:

Lee, Joseph Tse-Hei. <Book Reviews>The Spirit of Things: Materiality and Religious  
Diversity in Southeast Asia JULIUS BAUTISTA, ed. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program,  
Cornell University, 2012, x+220p.. Southeast Asian Studies 2014, 3(1): 236-238

ISSUE DATE:

2014-04

URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2433/187129>

RIGHT:

*The Spirit of Things: Materiality and Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia*

JULIUS BAUTISTA, ed.

Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012, x+220p.

Southeast Asia is a region of great religious diversity. A variety of ethnic religions interact with world religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, all of which, with the exception of Judaism, are still flourishing there. While advocates of secularization thesis previously deemed religion to be an antithesis to modernity, recent scholarship has shown that religion succeeds in adapting itself to the modernization process, and that it continues to shape personal beliefs, moral values, and faith practices in Southeast Asia today.

The 13 essays in *The Spirit of Things* vary in research scope and interest. The contributors are committed to analyzing the religious material culture from historical and ethnographic perspectives. They explore how religion manifests itself in different forms of material culture ranging from icons and liturgies to architecture and artifacts. These material forms not only make doctrinal teachings easily accessible to commoners but also define the world of beliefs and practices.

The opening essay by Julius Bautista and Anthony Reid conceptualizes the overlapping relations between materiality and religiosity in colonial and postcolonial Southeast Asia. Using the materiality of religion as a theoretical framework, they argue that religiosity is closely linked to collective rituals and sacred objects, and deeply embedded in local society. Because religious material culture covers a spectrum of sensory experiences and emotional sentiments, it is important to examine how certain icons, commodities, and acts come to be identified with devotional meanings in specific temporal and spatial contexts. Therefore, belief and material culture are not independent variables. Rather, they constantly interact with each other in both sacred and secular domains and shape the religious landscape.

The first two chapters highlight the effects of marketization on piety in Vietnam and Malaysia. Laurel Kendall, Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm, and Nguyễn Thị Thu Hương investigate the widespread circulation of sacred objects in contemporary Vietnam. Although the late twentieth-century Vietnamese reformers attacked organized religion and the devotional and liturgical practices of commoners, religious practitioners never remained passive subjects in the state-building process. They reacted to top-down institutional change by shifting their bargaining strategies, which in turn affected the socialist government's anti-religion policies. As a result, popular religions continue to flourish, providing people with moral guidance in a fast-changing world and enabling them to access the cosmological power of gods, ghosts, and ancestors for protection. Johan Fischer studies the efforts of middle-class Malay Muslims to reconcile next-worldly piety with worldly concerns like wealth and health (p.31). As automobiles become a major marker of socioeconomic status in Malaysia, many middle-class Muslims favor the ownership of locally-manufactured Proton cars as a moral and patriotic choice against the purchase of Western luxury cars.

People in Southeast Asia have experienced a long history of intra- and inter-state conflicts. In time of peace and stability, ecumenical infrastructure is thought to be capable of resolving religious and ethnic divides. Chapters 4 to 6 address the symbiotic relationship between religion and politics. Janet Hoskins analyzes the visual expression of Caodaism, a homegrown religion based in Tay Ninh, about 100 kilometers from Ho Chi Minh City. The Caodaists carved out a separate space for themselves at the margin of French Indochina. Owing deference neither to the French nor to the Communists, Caodaism was suppressed by the socialist state after 1975, and was only given legal recognition in 1997. The religious architecture in Tay Ninh today expresses a theological desire to operate as a self-autonomous faith community and to distance itself from secular politics. In a similar fashion, the Burmese regime has imposed direct control over the Buddhist monastic institutions that foster localism and ethnic identity. According to Klemens Karlsson, the Burmese rulers have actively supported the restoration of some largest Buddhist statues and temples in the ethnic minorities' regions in order to maintain national unity. While the homogeneous Buddhist order affirms the Burmese hegemony, it offers the subalterns a limited space to assert their local distinctions. This is true for the Buddha image-makers in Burma's Arakan as shown by Alexandra de Mersan. When the artisans are commissioned by the military commanders to make Buddha images, they incorporate their Arakanese sentiments into an imagined Burmese national order. By comparison, Malaysia witnesses a culture of interfaith unity at the grassroots level. Yeoh Seng Guan refers to the commodification of Saint Anne's water at a popular Malaysian Catholic pilgrimage shrine. Even though the popular belief in the efficacy of holy water is quite incompatible with the orthodox teachings of the Church, many lay Catholics, Malay Hindus, and Muslims still come to collect the water for their own use.

The power of sacred icons and liturgy is the focus of attention in chapters 7 to 9. While Anglicans and Catholics combine the use of word and icon as alternative modes of religious transmission, the Borneo Evangelical Church or known in Malay as Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB), the largest Protestant denomination in Malaysia, considers the Bible to be of utmost importance. Despite the absence of tangible sacred objects, Liana Chua points out that the SIB Christians combine the evangelistic, performative, and ritualistic modes of practices in order to live out their faith. Richard A. Ruth draws attention to the mass-produced Buddhist amulets, medallions, and talismans worn by Thai soldiers during their participation in the Vietnam War. Although these soldiers had access to advanced American weapons, they turned to these religious objects to overcome their fear of death. The US military even integrated the popular belief in these amulets into their psychological warfare against the Northern Vietnamese (p.144). Kenneth Sillander looks at the private altars among tribal communities in Indonesian Borneo, and reveals that these altars occupy a unique sacred space at home, enabling the households to access the protective power of village spirits.

The last three chapters concentrate on the making of sacred space among Thai Buddhists, Philippine Catholics, and Singaporean Chinese worshippers. According to Sandra Cate and Leedom

Lefferts, the widely circulated Buddhist scrolls are significant ritual objects in northeastern Thailand. During religious festivals, people carry the colorful scrolls in temple parades and carve out a space in the public sphere for personal religious petitions. Cecilia De La Paz offers insights into the ritual of carrying a wooden statue of crucified Christ during the Holy Week procession in the Philippines. As women perform the ritual at home and men are in charge of the procession outside, they completely turn their homes and the streets into a giant sacred space. Margaret Chan revisits the diversity of Chinese popular religions in Singapore. Of all the statues, the most colorful one is the Imperfect Deity which is made to exhibit the physical pains of worshippers such as bad eyesight, amputated legs, and crippled hands (p.205, figure 2). This visual adaptation caters to the spiritual needs of tired and stressed-out moderns.

Several important themes can be discerned in these essays. Conceptually, the idea of bringing materiality and religious diversity together in an interactive dialogue is original and refreshing. The contributors reveal strong historical, doctrinal, ritualistic, and socioeconomic connections between these two spheres. They write clearly and give those unfamiliar with religious diversity in Southeast Asia a sense of its dynamics and change in recent decades. They use numerous photos to illustrate the rich ethnographic data, and integrate analytical insights with concrete historical and anthropological examples.

Another important theme concerns the fact that religious diversity in Southeast Asia does not necessarily lead to ethnic divide and hatred as in other parts of the world. What these faith practitioners have in common is their ability to transcend ideological, religious, and cultural boundaries. These ritual activities display the important global, regional, and local links, and religious material culture exhibits a performative mode of faith practices that involve people from all walks of life. A good example of interreligious harmony is St. Anne's water that appeals to lay Catholics, Hindus, and Muslims.

Equally significant is the ongoing negotiation between religion and state over sacred and secular matters. In these countries, religious leaders and government officials appear to be more interdependent than has been acknowledged in the literature. When the state is strong, be it authoritarian or democratic, the religious organizations often participate in the formation of the state's legitimacy. But as the state reduces its control over sacred matters, religious leaders revert to their original autonomy and assert their influence in the public domain.

In short, this essay collection is timely and full of insightful details. It should belong to the shelves of anyone interested in Southeast Asian religions, the study of religious material culture, and the spiritualization of modern world.

Joseph Tse-Hei Lee 李樹熙  
*Department of History, Pace University*